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Villa le Lac: une Petite Maison

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Villa le Lac

THE SECRETS BEHIND LE CORBUSIER'S
"UNE PETIT MAISON"

WORDS Noel Brady PHOTOS Philip Lauterbach

Villa le Lac is a small house, "Une Petite Maison", which in real terms could mean "the smallest house". Compressed between the road and the lake at Vevey it betrays little of its order to the outside world as it folds itself within a defensive wall open only to the lake, and even then only in specific ways.

A PERFECT PLAN IN SEARCH FOR A PERFECT SITE

Corbusier and his cousin, Pierre Jeanneret, devised this house as a retirement home for Corbusier's mother and father, his mother living there until 1960. Completed in 1925, it was developed in a non-contextual way from ideas first formulated in the Maison Citrohan in 1922. Since 1923 Corbusier kept a plan of the house in his pocket during his travels between Paris and, Switzerland, Italy and Turkey, before he and Pierre settled on the site on the shores of Lake Geneva.

FAST AND SLOW

Originally the house was placed equidistant between the lake and the road, four metres on each side according to Corbusier's account in "Une Petite Maison", Editions d'Architecture, Zurich. This equanimity of placement confirms the universal nature of the project. In later years, the road was widened adding to the tension felt by this small structure. Barely bigger than a modern urban apartment it resists the speed of the road by focusing all of its energy on the slowness of the water. In between the house and its entombing garden wall establishes a field of resistance, a dam of sorts filtering the noise and activity of the external world. It establishes an "in between" realm where an internal life might be lived, a retirement from the external condition, the weary landscape beyond. ►



As Corbusier said, “...le paysage omnipresent sur toutes les faces, omnipotent, deviant lassant.”¹ (roughly translated as: landscape omnipresent on all the faces, omnipotent, deviant wearying”)

LIFE ON A LEDGE

Switzerland is a country defined between green foothills and rocky mountains. Life is lived, as it is elsewhere, somewhere between hardship and enjoyment. Along this edge of Lake Geneva, the valley slopes are filled with vines, situated on terraces, ledges and slopes between retaining walls. This annual harvest was celebrated at the time of the purchase by sharing a glass of local wine with the “vineyard salesman”. This idea of the honourable primitive and his physical work appealed to Corbusier, who said: “les vigernons sont forts! Oeuvre séculaire, peut-être millénaire”² (roughly translated as: The vigernons are strong! Secular, old work) Perhaps that such a groundless house should find a place to root along this vulnerable ledge should not be such a surprise. As a seed blown from international Paris, it would be effectively quarantined, the local commune deciding soon after that this “crime against nature” was not to be repeated, the wall therefore being a prescient indicator of its reception. Nonetheless, it remained a productive home for Corbusier’s father, mother and then musician brother.

THE INFINITE HORIZON AND MINIMUM EXISTENCE

The house is comparable to its contemporary designs, such as the Citrohan House or those of the Weissenhof in Stuttgart for Der Deutsche Werkbund’s ►



second international exhibition in 1925. It was during this period that the concept of "existenz minimum" was both voiced and concretised. In parallel to this investigation, Corbusier developed the ribbon window. As one of the five points of architecture, it was argued that this was to provide better illumination to the interior, but as we see in Villa Savoye, this was connected to a broader agenda, that of the horizon, a boundary for the eye to command, the place of phenomenological existence. Coupled with the planimetric linearity of contemporary travel preoccupations of both train and plane it is one of the most iconic elements of Corbusian style that many have sought to emulate at least in visual terms. In the Weissenhof schemes the plan was "...a sort of sleeping-dining car combined, with equipment for day and night."³...and "as in a train, many of the desks, tables and storage units are built in as equipment rather than furniture."⁴ It was precisely this model that formed Villa Le Lac. Extrapolated from the conceptual universality of the prototype modern house, a minimum organisation, it was based in part on efficiencies of contemporary travel linked to an intellectual desire to command the landscape within its frame. Built to its allowable maximum height, it suffered more acutely from the limitations of budget and tectonic rigour when it had to be re-sheeted in aluminium panels in the 1950s.

STRETCHING LOUNGING

Like an elderly Cote D'Azur sunbather, the house no longer boasts its sterile white exterior, stretching out along the lake like the many summer residences we now expect to see throughout Southern European resorts, its skin is wrinkled, aged, adjusting to the uncertainty of deeper tectonic movements. It still holds for us a quaint interest in the powerful image of an architecture freed from history's imprisoned image only to be imprisoned again in a new canon of hysterical myth making. Corbusier never intended the models such as Domino or Citrohan to be a literal template, but a language with roots and verbs and syntaxes that would be explored, experimented, reworked and developed. Nonetheless, excepting most of the imitators, the original still holds our interest. It is with some irony that though partly invented by Corbusier, the mastering of this new international language was to be found elsewhere. This work is more relaxed than many of his other works, and although offers us clues to the mathematical rigour of the oeuvre, the house uses and dispenses with his own five points when and where necessary to create a ►

singular place of existence for his own family. "One concern has been uppermost in my mind: to make the family sacred, to make a temple of the family home."⁵

TEMPLE AND ENCLOSURE

The discipline of this small house is akin to that utilised by Tadao Ando, in the Manabe and the Koshino Residences where the wall, that exterior skin, is used to screen and envelope the house in its own sanctified ground. The direction of these houses appears to be towards some infinite horizon, as if to ignore the immediate culture and the weary landscape of its place, and instead identify with some sacred objective, the infinite. This is what sets the architecture upon a higher plane and it is precisely this that ensures such places are occupied for a lifetime, rewarding the dweller a rooted link to the ground upon which it stands. This is not without some irony. [Select](#)

¹ Une Petite Maison, Editions d'Architecture, Zurich

² Ibid

³ P. 128 The Le Corbusier Guide, Princeton Architectural Press 1987

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Le Corbusier, Mise au point July 1965, P. 151 Le Corbusier Architect of New Age, Thames & Hudson

VILLA LE LAC

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The Villa Le Lac is on the west edge of Vevey, on route de Lavaux, the road leading out of town beyond the Nestlé headquarters building. The villa is shortly on your left, car parking is signposted just beyond. On foot it is around 15 minutes from the center of Vevey.

The villa is open to the public, but only on Wednesday afternoons, from 1.30pm to 5pm (or by appointment). It is administered by the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris. To check opening times please call in advance.

